

China Tackles 'Masculinity Crisis,' Tries to Stop 'Effeminate' Boys



Children attend a class in Shanghai, China. JOHANNES EISELE / AFP-Getty Images, file

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By Eric Baculinao

BEIJING — With enormous economic clout and a powerful military and a strongman president, the image that China projects to the outside world is one of strength and confidence.

At home, however, some believe the nation's over-protected young boys are becoming physically and emotionally weak — leaving China facing what is being called a "crisis of masculinity."



Children attend a class in Shanghai, China.
JOHANNES EISELE / AFP-Getty Images, file

Some commentators in China, where gender identity is much less blurred than in Western culture, suggest it could lead to social problems and even imperil the country's national security.

A new school textbook that aims to teach boys how to be "masculine" men has been released. Called "Little Men," the book covers the differences between boys and girls, the importance of the father-son relationship as well as the importance of interacting with nature and managing money.

The colorfully illustrated book was first published in December 2016 by Shanghai Educational Publishing House and has been approved for fourth and fifth grade classes across the country, after a trial period in selected schools.

"This course is necessary for boys," Miao Li, 36, a businessman, told NBC News while waiting to pick up his daughter recently outside a Beijing primary school. "They are so over-protected by the family they don't do physical activities anymore."

"Nowadays, girls are becoming more like boys while the boys are becoming more like girls, introvert and shy," echoed another parent called Huang, a hotel employee.

"The boys are now less masculine than when I was of their age," said a retired worker named Tian, a grandfather to an 8-year-old boy.



Children gather after class outside of the Beijing Fangcaodi Primary School on Dec. 22.
Eric Baculinao / NBC News

Another retiree named Huang, with a 7-year-old grandson, noted that boys are “more fragile emotionally and physically due to too much homework.”

The roots of China’s masculinity crisis can be traced to a number of areas, one of which is the country’s [One Child policy](#), implemented between 1979 and 2015. The policy restricted the number of children families were allowed to have in order to curb the country’s surging population growth. It was replaced with a two-child limit last year.

“The problem is that the family spoils the kid with love and care,” said a hotel management worker surnamed Sheng, mother of a first-grader, suggesting that over-indulgence and parents’ fear of losing their only child has stunted the natural adventurous character of boys.

Discussion about this effect of the One Child policy has been rife in China for years. Commentators have long lamented social phenomena such as so-called “Little Emperor Syndrome” or “Prince Syndrome,” where a life of pampering and constant praise led many Chinese only-children to develop poor social skills and become egocentric and over-reliant on their parents.

[FROM OCT. 2015: Young People in Beijing React to End of One-Child Policy](#)



Some sections of the Chinese media have also suggested that the popularity of effeminate Korean and Japanese actors and pop stars is a factor in the supposedly diminishing masculinity of Chinese youth. Last month, a headline in a prominent English-language Chinese newspaper blamed a “gender crisis” on effeminate men in Japanese, Korean culture.”

China’s education system may also have played a role in bringing about the current state of affairs, with some commentators blaming an acute shortage of male teachers in the country, depriving young boys of male role models. Four out of five teaching positions in urban areas of China are held by women.

According to Tiantian Zheng, a professor of anthropology at State University of New York at Cortland, the issue of “masculinity” and the upbringing of boys is being treated as a priority at state level educational policy.

Measures that could result from this include “the establishment of all boys’ middle schools, the textbook you cited [‘Little Men’], experts’ psychology clinics and media discourse,” she told NBC News.

In a study published last year, Zheng observed that Chinese experts have called for stronger “gender-difference education,” arguing that “the crisis of masculinity in effeminate men is considered a peril to the security of the nation because it reflects powerlessness, inferiority, feminized passivity, and social deterioration reminiscent of the colonial past when China was defeated by the colonizing West.”

Chinese media has portrayed the “lack of manhood not only as a public menace and a threat to the family, but also as a metaphor for passive masculinity and national crisis,” she wrote. Distinctive gender roles and strong manhood were considered “crucial in safeguarding the security of the nation,” she noted.

But not everyone believes there is a problem. “I see diversity of human beings as something to celebrate, rather than repress,” Zheng told NBC News.

“It would benefit our society and make the world a better place if we all could critically evaluate and challenge, rather than perpetuate and reinforce the entrenched cultural notions of femininity and masculinity that imprison us all,” she added.

Researchers Dawn Liu and Sami Tseng contributed to this report.